

## *Testing Karma*

*September 6, 2006*

One of the distinctive features of the Buddha's teachings is that they're something we can all put to the test. He doesn't ask us to believe in things we have no way of knowing. Now, there are some things we may not be sure of yet. In a few cases, he asks you to take things on faith, but you take them on faith so that you can test them. For instance, the teachings on karma: He never gives an airtight proof that what he teaches about karma is correct. But the things he teaches are things that you would reasonably like to believe: You really do have choices in what you do, say, and think. Your actions really do make a difference. You can act in such a way that you can really put an end to suffering.

Now, when you first hear these things, you can't prove them, at least not in an empirical way. So the Buddha offers a pragmatic test to begin with. Just think: If you believe that you have choices and that they determine your experience of pleasure and pain, what would that do to your life? How would that influence your actions? You'd be more careful in how you choose what to do. If you believed you had no choices in life, that you had no free will, how would you live? You'd just act in any old way at all. There'd be no incentive to make the effort to choose a skillful path and stick with it. There'd be no incentive to make an effort at all.

So on a pragmatic level, it makes sense to take as a working hypothesis that you do have choices, and that your choices do make a difference. Then you can put them to the test to see how far that difference would go. Again, when the Buddha says that your actions can lead all the way to the ultimate happiness, a true happiness totally unconditioned, it's good thing to believe. It helps keep you from getting waylaid by lesser forms of happiness. But whether it's true or not, you've got to put it to the test.

So that's what we're doing here right now. We're putting the Buddha's teachings to the test. Always try to be clear about what you know and what you don't know yet, because one of the biggest obstacles to learning anything is assuming that you know something when it's only an assumption.

So we consciously assume the teachings on karma. We consciously assume the principle that we do have choice, and that not all of what we've been doing so far in our lives has been worthwhile. Then we put those assumptions to the test. The Buddha was an amazing teacher. He never tried to intimidate anyone into believing what he taught. He wasn't a demagogue. He wasn't laying a power trip

on other people. He had found something that really worked. Then he offered it freely. He said, “Look, give this a try” And that was it.

So the teachings are there for us to try, to sample, to see what works and what doesn't work. All of the teachings have to be put to the test. The Buddha says that mindfulness and alertness are really helpful. So to see how helpful they are, let's develop mindfulness; let's develop some alertness. Discernment he says is a good thing. Good in what way? Well, it leads to true happiness. That's always the main context of the entire teachings, the assumption that we all want happiness, and the assumption that it's basically a good thing, this desire for happiness. Where that desire goes astray is that we can have all sorts of wrong ideas, one, about what true happiness would be, and two, how to get true happiness.

So the Buddha doesn't ask you stop desiring happiness. He simply says to try these different ways of looking for happiness. As you do that, your conception of happiness is going to change. Wisdom begins with this question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? Right there in that question you have the seed for the big issues of discernment. The test for happiness is, one, that it's long-term. So anything that's inconstant or impermanent will not qualify. Two, it really does have to be happy, so anything that's stressful doesn't qualify. And three, it has to be something you can trust. So anything that you can't control doesn't qualify, either.

How do you test those things? You push the limits. As when you practice concentration: As I said this morning, you're pushing the envelope on those three characteristics. You're trying to develop a state of mind that lasts. You stitch mental moments together with mindfulness, remembering to stay with one object again and again and again, because the mind can so easily forget and slip off to other things. So you have keep reminding it, “Stay right here; stay with the breath,” and see how long you can do that. Push the envelope on inconstancy. You want to be as steadily with the breath as you can. Now, to be steadily with the breath, you have to try to make it pleasant, because if it's unpleasant, you're not going to stay here. Find what way of breathing feels good right now, what kind of breathing the mind can really relate to in a continuous way. Try not to force the breath too much.

Remember that breath energy is something that flows very freely through the body. It may get stuck here and there, but as you try to squeeze it here, squeeze it there, force it, hold the breath, or whatever, that just creates more problems. That's actually playing more with the liquid and solid elements in the body. Breath is more mercurial than mercury. It's constantly flowing, constantly moving. So don't try to bottle it up.

And you find that as you give the breath more freedom, you do change the level of pleasure and ease in the body.

That's pushing the envelope on the second of the three characteristics.

Then finally you learn to control things in a more intelligent way. You're not becoming control freak where you force an impossible idea on things. People who have genuine control are the ones who've mastered the principle of cause and effect and have seen how you can effectively have an impact on events in a way that doesn't require that you're constantly stressed out over them. So to what extent can you skillfully control the mind, control your choices, control your intentions? We're pushing the envelope on the third of the three characteristics here.

Ultimately, you find a point where they push back. But you don't know that point for sure until you've pushed them as far as you can.

This is another teaching that the Buddha has you test. It's almost as if he says, "Prove me wrong."

We're here to explore. We're not here to clone enlightenment. We're here to test the principle of cause and effect: Do our choices really have an impact? Do they have an impact for the good? What should I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? Do my actions have the ability to lead to a long-term welfare and happiness? Exactly how good is that welfare and happiness? How far do these concepts go? We're here to test them. As the Buddha once said, if you don't try to aim for this kind of happiness—the happiness that doesn't age, grow ill, or die—then your life isn't noble. "Noble" is one of those words that tends to disappear from our modern vocabulary, like dignity, civility, restraint. It's because as a society we're taught to keep our standards low.

One of the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha is because he reminds us that we shouldn't keep our standards low. We should have respect for our desire for a long-term happiness, a true happiness, a happiness so long-term that it actually goes beyond time. He says there is that possibility. If you don't rise to challenge of that possibility, your life can't be called noble.

So put the possibility of nobility to the test. And see how far it can take you.